

Breakout Session: Scientist Personal Branding, facilitated by Massie Ballon from the Joint Genome Institute

In the group, there was a general consensus that science would benefit from having more scientists trained and motivated to communicate their science, not just in academic settings but to the world at large as part of their “personal brand.” While not every scientist can or should be a science communication “rock star,” there is potential to widen the pool of potential representatives an institution has when communicating research. Expanding this group would allow for diversity and reduce the risk of “burn out” for both the scientists and the public.

PIOs at DOE-funded institutions welcome this opportunity and the support of DOE. However, they feel that there is a constant tension between the desire to bring science stories to the public and the Department’s “risk averse” nature. This leads scientists feeling stifled or afraid to communicate at all. Participants agreed that scientists who choose to have a public persona should be encouraged to represent themselves as a scientist from a particular institution. This association benefits both the credibility of the scientist and the renown of the institution. This identification, however, should not be grounds for DOE to micromanage all communications that the scientist produces. Rather, the DOE should encourage researchers as representatives and work to support them. DOE management should offer clear, but realistic, media guidelines and then hold people accountable to them. Scientists can’t be expected to build a personal brand, a key step to becoming a “rock star,” if they aren’t allowed to be personal.

The group had three core recommendations for Office of Science director Chris Fall:

1. Tell national lab and university leadership to invest more in communications by building communications activities into the budgets of programs, projects, and centers and offering motivators for scientists to be communicators
2. Trust the PIOs and other communicators on the ground, which would allow for timely responses to media requests and build trust between leadership and field communicators
3. Support institutions in identifying and cultivating more science communication “rock stars” to increase diversity of background, scientific discipline, and communication medium strengths as well as to fight “burn out”